The Fourth Church Pulpit

GOD WITH A HUMAN FACE

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture Matthew 1:18-25

"... 'and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'"
Matthew 1:23 (NRSV)

For the people of this congregation, members and friends of the family of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, the past two weeks have been punctuated by experiences of beauty. Just two weeks ago today we worshiped in our restored sanctuary in all its glory for the first time. We heard wonderful music; choir, organ and brass — and that evening a concert of innovative jazz and classical and ethnic music. And if the whole truth were told, members of this staid Presbyterian congregation actually leaned their heads back, shut their eyes and howled — joining Paul Winter, Paul Halley, a recording of a timber wolf — in what Paul Winter called a "Howlelujah Chorus."

Today, Christmas Sunday, it's "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," Michael Praetorius and Daniel Pinkham. This evening we will share the lovely experience and the gorgeous music of the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols and on Christmas Eve itself, Candlelight and Banners and Light.

It is, I think every year, an aesthetic extravaganza which offers all of us an incomparable opportunity to celebrate Christmas fully, honestly, spiritually.

And in the midst of it all there was one event which, as I have thought about it, contained something of the essence of the theology of Christmas. Compared with the other glorious and beautiful events of the past two weeks, this one was unlikely and modest. It occurred here, after worship last Sunday.

The children's Christmas pageant was happening here in the chancel. There were scattered parents, relatives and church members watching. I walked in while the children's choir was singing. Now, some church Christmas pageants use a doll for the role of baby Jesus. It is certainly a safe way to do it. At Fourth Church, we are committed to theological and artistic integrity, so baby Jesus is always a real baby, one of our recent arrivals. And when possible, the actual parents play Mary and Joseph. This year's baby Jesus was a little boy eleven months old — Cullan James Bendig. We have had some wonderful baby Jesuses by the way. Several years ago baby Jesus was a girl. In any event this year's Jesus, a little more mature than most, and certainly more vigorous than a newborn, was not content to play the passive role assigned to him which is, as you know, simply to lie in the manger. This Jesus wanted to sit up and watch what was happening and be part of the action, which is what he did. The angel chorus was singing at that moment and Jesus, as babies are inclined to do, joined in ... adding his pure and clear voice to the chorus with a lot of volume! The Virgin Mary, actually his real mother, Ruth, sensing that he was stealing the show from the other children who had worked very hard to memorize the words to the angel chorus, reached under her lovely robe and from somewhere under there produced a pacifier, which she placed from the back with admirable accuracy, whereupon Jesus immediately stopped singing and happily, with those wonderful, bright, wide eyes, looked around, worked on the pacifier, and enjoyed the rest of the show.

There is, you might as well know the truth, or used to be, considerable clerical and academic disdain for children's Christmas pageants, what we used to call Sunday School bathrobe drama, little boys playing Magi in their fathers' bathrobes and little girls playing angels in bed sheets. One critique observes that they are as much a part of an American Christmas as indigestion. My guess is that we got our disdain from teachers who never had a child in a Christmas pageant, and we seminary students, not yet having children old enough, confidently and contemptuously critiqued this bourgeois, sentimental, trivializing of the incarnation. No wise men in bathrobes and angels in bed sheets for us. For the edification of all, we would demythologize the story: the congregation would sit instead, in rapt meditation on Christmas Sunday and Christmas Eve, listening to Bach and pondering the eternal logos becoming flesh, the high theology of incarnation.

And then, of course, we personally experienced a few of these wonderful rituals or — and this always cinched it — our children started to appear in the Christmas pageant in starring roles.

William Willimon who teaches and is the University pastor at Duke, observes that when

> "your child is in one of these theatrical travesties, it is a theological sacrilege. When my child is in such a pageant, it is strangely the most inspiring thing I ever saw and the highlight of my Christmas."

Ever since Barbara Robinson wrote her now classic *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, a delightfully funny little book, we have been acknowledging that there is something about these modest little reenactments of the nativity which is strangely authentic, not just cute, but somehow not far from the truth the story proclaims.

And there is something authentic about what happens at the first rehearsal in Robinson's book. The narrator's mother is the director of the pageant and she is valiantly striving to contend with the Herdman children, "the absolute worst kids in the history of the world." In a moment of foolish grace she has awarded the role of Mary to Imogene Herdman.

The Herdmans, of course, don't even know the story, so mother begins by reading it from the Bible.

> "Joseph and Mary, his espoused wife, being great with child ...
>
> "'Pregnant,' yelled Ralph Herdman.
>
> "Well, that stirred things up. All the big kids began to giggle and all the little kids wanted to know what was so funny, and mother had to hammer on the floor with a blackboard pointer. 'That's enough, Ralph,' she said, and went on with the story.
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> "'I don't think it's very nice to say Mary was pregnant,' Alice whispered to me.
>
> "But she was, I pointed out. In a way, though, I agreed with her. It sounded too ordinary. Anybody could be pregnant. 'Great with child' sounded better for Mary.
>
> "'I'm not supposed to talk about people being pregnant,' Alice folded her hands in her lap and pinched her lips together. 'I'd better tell my mother.'
>
> "'Tell her what?'
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> "'That your mother is talking about things like that in church. My mother might not want me to be here.'" [p. 41-42]

Well, I confess after thirty years of watching, first as a disdainful student, then a father, now a grandfather, and throughout as a pastor to the families, the fathers and mothers of the little actors and actresses, oftentimes having held them in my arms a few years before and baptized them; after hundreds of shepherds, sheep, angels and lowing cattle and finally Jesus with a pacifier, I confess that I think the children get it right. They tell it truthfully.

It was not a staged event. The characters were not posed by Hallmark. It was an unlikely series of events that confused and scared everybody. "Mary," someone said, was not so much the "Queen of Heaven" the artists make her as a badly frightened teenager, separated from her mother, stuck with an older man in a barn as her labor began. So when Jesus pops up in the manger and startles everyone by singing, it's an authentic nativity event: surprisingly unrehearsed, unplanned, and so beautifully and authentically human.

It was Martin Luther, who in addition to starting the Reformation, was a classical scholar and occasionally a little ponderous, being a Lutheran, who said that when God speaks to humanity God always speaks in baby talk. And furthermore, observed Luther,

> "All subsequent chatter of learned theologians is but a series of footnotes on the primal baby talk." [W. Willimon, *On A Wild and Windy Mountain*, p. 29]

Why baby talk? Why not academic philosophy? Why not a mathematical formula? Why baby Jesus instead of Aristotle?

Babies, we now know, have a kind of unerring instinct for love. You can't put much over on them. Babies know love when they see it and experience it.

The real temptation for Christians at Christmas, I think, is not so much to be lured by the commercialism of the culture as it is to overact to the glitzy materialism all around us and to spiritualize the story, to try to reclaim Christmas from the crassness of the culture and in the process forget that it was a very worldly, very human event.

The whole point is that the Lord of creation, the God of all the ages, loves us and has come among us. The word has become flesh.

Karl Barth, probably the greatest theological mind of the 20th century, wrote a mammoth twelve volume work of theology, lectured all over the world, was celebrated and welcomed by the leading universities of the world, used to preach regularly, not in a great cathedral, but in the city jail in Basel, Switzerland. He made a point, particularly on Christmas, to be there.

Those prison sermons are published in a volume, "Deliverance To The Captives." In one Christmas sermon he said that when we think about God,

> "we think of the highest, deepest, the absolute, the ultimate — some mysterious abstraction. But the God revealed at Christmas — "The Lord your God" he told the prisoners, "is a God with a name, a face, a personality ... a God whom we used to call as children and still may call today a 'Dear God.'" [p. 111]

What a very different religion that is. Professor Hans Kung, Karl Barth's student and pupil, said it eloquently.

> "God should not be conceived as an abstract idea, remote from humankind, but the God who acts within the scope of human history. Not a God who keeps out of everything and remains in transcendence untouched by the world's suffering, but one who actively takes part and becomes involved ... In brief ... God with a human face." [*On Being A Christian*, p. 308]

That's the radical claim of Christmas: that Almighty God comes to us as a child: that love comes to us in the only way you and I know about love, through another human being: that God touches our lives with kindness and compassion and immediacy.

The theology of incarnation is how we attempt to penetrate and describe the meaning of Christmas. And that theology, no matter how vigorously we express it and proclaim it and contend with it, is simply this. God loves us. We are loved so much that God has come to us to express that love — in a way we simply cannot miss or misunderstand: in the birth of a baby. The Lord is at hand.

That, William Willimon says, is the word for all of us at Christmas. The Lord is at hand. And it means simply that we are not alone, and the burdens we bear do not need to be borne alone, and the demons we contend with do not have to be faced alone: and the challenges and fears and anxieties we are confronting do not have to be confronted alone.

We need that, you and I do. Sometime in the middle of this frenzied, hectic week you and I are going to have a quiet moment or two and we are going to find ourselves asking: What is this all about? What is the meaning of all this activity, all this festivity and gift giving and well wishing? And then we will hear the word: You are not alone. Not now, now ever. God with a human face.

Why would God do such a thing? After all is said and done, isn't that the ultimate religious question? Why in the world would God do this, stoop this low, leave the courts of heaven or recesses of the universe and become a baby? Why should God be at our mercy, subject to our whims? There is only one answer. God is love. Love becomes vulnerable. That's what love is — the voluntary assumption of another's hopes and dreams and disappointments as one's own. Love — to be love — someone said, always suffers with the beloved. A parent, Madeleine L'Engle said, is only ever as happy as her least happy child. That's what love is. That's what love does.

And one thing further. God took a human face so that you and I, so thoroughly loved, might start to look a little like God — which, of course, means like the vulnerable love that God is. The whole point, it seems, is that God wants to make a difference in your life, wants to change you, wants, in fact, to make a lover out of you: wants to fill your life with such love that you can't resist giving it away to others, wants to fill your life with such love that you eagerly, selflessly, start to love — your dear ones, your friends, your neighbors, the ones particularly who need you.

The Lord is at hand. A child is born and angels sing. The most wonderful thing has happened. Love has been given. Love is there to be received and embraced and expressed. It is Christmas ... God with a human face.